

[https://www.childrensdefense.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Madison-Metropolitan-School-District-Profile\\_Final-PDF.pdf](https://www.childrensdefense.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Madison-Metropolitan-School-District-Profile_Final-PDF.pdf)

*Working with the National Equity Project to Address Implicit Bias*

*“So, as a district, at every level, board, central office, school, classroom, we are pretty obsessive with continuous improvement and constantly going through the cycle of refinement to encourage people to take the resources that we are providing them and make adjustments and supplement and strengthen them based on the needs of our kids.”*

*“Press the pause button before making critical decisions about children.”*

*~ Superintendent  
Jennifer Cheatham,  
Madison Metropolitan  
School District*

Superintendent Cheatham noted: **“For us, a major challenge is related to African-American students’ current lack of a deep sense of belonging in the classroom.** As a district, MMSD has been really grappling with student engagement, more specifically a student’s sense of belonging at school. **Undergirding all of the work that we are doing as a district is what we are doing on racial equity and implicit bias. We’ve been working with the National Equity Project beginning with school leaders, all central office staff, principals, instructional coaches, deans, assistant principals, and other teacher leaders to understand implicit bias at a deep level, to recognize it within ourselves and do our own personal work.** We are learning how to create spaces where we can slow things down and **press the pause button before making critical decisions about children.”**

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## GETTING BUY-IN

Once strategies are in place, it is important to keep the feedback loop open and have periodic review of progress. In MMSD, various modes of gathering input and feedback are used when planning to do something, of significance. There is a structured, disciplined review cycle. For example, MMSD hosts **open forum opportunities** in the evenings for community members to come and speak; the forums are usually in an attendance area and refreshments are served. MMSD also uses **online surveys or feedback forms** to gather information from people who are unable to attend forums. Also, focus groups are very important when it comes to student voice. **MMSD has held focus groups with a range of students in every single middle school and high school.** MMSD uses this process to reflect annually.

MMSD also works to keep the board informed with **quarterly reports on progress with student discipline, both implementation and outcomes.** There is also a **mid-year public board meeting** to check in on how things are going. Lastly, there is an **end-of-the-year public board meeting** to make adjustments to the policy itself. Changes are made based on what was learned and then budget revisions and practice improvements follow. After the annual review process is completed, it starts again with gathering student and community feedback.

Importantly, MMSD intentionally reaches out to major social justice-oriented groups like the NAACP and the YWCA. It has worked well to collaborate with community leaders and coalitions. Superintendent Cheatham shared a cautionary tale: **“I think we did a great job creating a coalition of support in order to get our new policy passed. I think we made a tactical error in not keeping that coalition engaged through our first year of implementation.”** She advised that when you begin the hard work of implementation and people are unhappy about the change, it is beneficial to have a strong coalition helping to problem solve along the way. Thus, MMSD course corrected and reestablished the coalition this past year. Superintendent Cheatham explained: **“We invited that group back together. So we have a coalition on restorative practice and student discipline**

that includes union representation, the police, various social justice groups, teacher representation, and parent representation . . . a fairly broad-based group. There may be 40 members, and we meet regularly with them to help us solve problems together.”

## OUTCOMES

### *Students and Out-of-School Suspensions*

As a part of this shift to address both behavior and instruction, the Behavior Education Plan (BEP) was introduced for the first time in the 2014-15 school year. The BEP makes it harder to suspend students overall, especially in grades K-3.<sup>1</sup> In 2014-15, there were no suspensions in grades K-1 and only 15 total in grades 2-3.<sup>2</sup> Over the past five years, out-of-school suspensions have decreased considerably. “From 2013-14 to 2014-15 alone, out of school suspensions declined more than 40%.”<sup>3</sup> Days of lost instruction due to out-of-school suspensions also have declined. “More than 1900 fewer days of instruction were lost in 2014-15 relative to 2013-14, equivalent to more than 10 full school years of instruction.”<sup>4</sup>

While out-of-school suspensions decreased, there were increases in some racial/ethnic disproportionalities.<sup>5</sup> For example, Black students only comprise 18% of MMSD, but in 2013-14, 59% of OSS were Black students, and in 2014-15 it was 62%.<sup>6</sup>

MMSD recognizes the tension between the reduction in OSS and the persistence in disproportionality. Superintendent Cheatham explained: **“The reduction in and of itself should never be underestimated. I mean this is really important progress, but the real work is about influencing the disproportionality. We are making assumptions about children and families, and slowing down the process and trying to take a step back before making those snap judgments. It is the only way we’re really going to start to impact disproportionality numbers.”**

### *Teachers*

Teachers continue to build on their skills and work through the change process in MMSD. Superintendent Cheatham explained: “This is not just about instituting a new policy that doesn’t allow you to suspend or expel, but it’s about utilizing these strategies that make us less reliant on suspension and expulsion. So I think that’s positive. I think that what we’re seeing is the classrooms that are most deeply trained in responsive classrooms and developmental designs as well as restorative practices are calling less for support in the classroom when it comes to discipline.

<sup>1</sup> See MMSD Behavior Report 2014-15, at 4, available at <https://studentservices.madison.k12.wi.us/files/stusvc/2015-7-1%20Behavior%20Report%202014-15.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> *Id.*

<sup>3</sup> *Id.*

<sup>4</sup> *Id.*

<sup>5</sup> See *supra* note 1 at 5.

<sup>6</sup> *Id.*

It reinforces the need to expand and deepen that training district-wide. Similarly we are seeing that schools that are regularly using circle practices are demonstrating higher rates on staff climate indicators as well as student climate indicators. I think that’s been important and also a challenge and a major area of learning for us. **How do you do this work while helping staff feel supported? That’s been our biggest struggle. And the fact that the schools that are using these practices with more intensity and focus, staff members are feeling more supported. That’s good.**

NEXT STEPS

With Superintendent Cheatham at the helm, MMSD has made significant progress in decreasing OSS overall and improving school climate. MMSD intends to work on continuous improvement and constant refinement so that the district can respond to the needs of its children.

Superintendent Cheatham noted: **“This is really about changing mindsets, values, and beliefs about children and the relationship between adults and children. So I invite everyone to talk more honestly about that because it’s messy, and it’s the long-term work that we really need to be doing together.”**

To that end, in the spirit of camaraderie, you can stay connected with Superintendent Cheatham or learn more about MMSD via the following channels:

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